

14 December 1979

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: IRAN: Relations with the USSR

Summary

Since the occupation of the US Embassy in Tehran on 4 November Iran, as part of a worldwide effort to secure backing for its anti-US campaign, has been trying to improve relations with the USSR. The Iranians have muted their previous harsh criticism of the Soviet role in Afghanistan and Ayatollah Khomeini's regime has tolerated a more visible political role for the pro-Soviet Communist Tudeh Party. [REDACTED]

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Iran's Ambassador to Moscow Muhammad Mokri is a key figure in improving relations. Mokri has long had close ties to the Tudeh Party and is probably sympathetic to some of Moscow's interests. [REDACTED]

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Khomeini's regime continues to have strong suspicions about intentions and Soviet activities in Iran and relations could deteriorate again once the hostage crisis ends. Some Iranian leaders, however--including Mokri--probably hope to continue to improve relations. These Iranians may lobby for buying Soviet arms and stepping up economic ties. [REDACTED]

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Discussion

The hostage crisis between the US and Iran has encouraged Iran to improve its previously hostile relationship with the Soviet Union. As part of Tehran's worldwide effort to secure support for its struggle against Washington, Iranian leaders have welcomed Soviet moral and political backing and sought to portray an image of better relations. In a Le Monde interview of 30 November, Khomeini's grandson stated that the US-Iranian crisis had opened the door to a "tactical alliance" with Moscow. [REDACTED]

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The change in Iran's policy is most noticeable in Tehran's media treatment of Soviet related issues--especially the Soviet involvement in Afghanistan. Prior to the seizure of the US Embassy in Tehran, Iran was one of the most vocal opponents of the Soviet role in Afghanistan. Since the seizure of the Embassy, Iranian media commentary on Afghanistan has declined sharply. Contrary to some press reports, however, it has not ended entirely. On 25 November, for example, Tehran radio broadcast a message of support for Khomeini from Afghan insurgents who noted that they were struggling against a "satonic" superpower just as Khomeini is and on 5 December Tehran reported favorably an insurgent attack on an Afghan military outpost. [REDACTED]

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The shift in Iranian views of the Soviets has also been apparent in treatment of the USSR's own role in Iran. Tehran in the past was critical of leftist activity in Iran--particularly the activities of the pro-Soviet Communist Tudeh Party--and hinted on occasion that Moscow was trying to destabilize Iran by instigating unrest among Iran's minorities, especially the Kurds. Media commentary on these themes has also declined sharply and the Tudeh Party has become more visible in the last few weeks than at any other time in months.* Some criticism of leftist activity in Iran has continued, but it has not been directed at the Soviets. Ayatollah Khomeini has accused leftists and the US of instigating the unrest in Azarbayjan, for example. [REDACTED]

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Ambassador Mokri's Role

Iran's Ambassador to the USSR, Mohammad Mokri, is a key figure in working to improve Iranian-Soviet ties. Mokri met

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with Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko on 26 November and said afterwards that he had requested and received a definite assurance of moral support for the Iranian revolution. Mokri said he had not sought Soviet military assistance in the event of a military confrontation between the US and Iran.

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Mokri was appointed Ambassador to Moscow in April. A Kurd, Mokri was a member of Khomeini's entourage in Paris last year and has had relatively good access to the Ayatollah. Mokri served in Prime Minister Mossadegh's government and was arrested and imprisoned after the 1953 coup. After escaping from prison, Mokri spent most of the next 25 years in France.

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During his residence in France, Mokri had frequent contacts with Iranian leftists, especially the Tudeh Party. According to a West European source, Mokri was a member of the French section of the Tudeh Party for several years in the mid-1950s. He later distanced himself somewhat from the Tudeh, but did travel often to East Germany where the Tudeh Party leadership resided after the Shah outlawed the Party in 1953. Mokri is also reported to have visited Moscow during this period.

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There is no information to indicate that Mokri is currently a Tudeh Party member, but he does retain close ties to the Iranian left and is probably sympathetic to Soviet interests. In early September, Mokri accused the US, Israel and the UK of plotting to destabilize Iran by supporting Kurdish and Azarbayjani separatism. Mokri said that the Soviets would not engage in such a program and that he had received his information on the "plot" from the Soviets.

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Lingering Suspicions

Despite the improvements in ties since early November and the efforts of Ambassador Mokri, Khomeini's regime remains extremely suspicious of the Soviets. In the Ayatollah's view, Moscow is both an atheistic enemy of Islam and a traditional foe of Iranian national interests. He could easily turn both on the Tudeh Party and the Soviets when it suits his purposes.

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The lingering Iranian suspicions of Moscow were illustrated on 5 November when Tehran unilaterally abrogated Articles 5 and 6 of the 1921 Iran-Soviet Treaty; articles that gave Moscow a pretext for intervening in Iran. The Iranians made clear their view that Moscow has no legitimate right to military intervention in Iranian affairs. [REDACTED]

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Some Iranian leaders, in fact, would probably like to export Khomeini's militant Islamic revolution to Soviet Muslims. At the very least, the Iranians would like to increase their ties with Soviet Muslims. According to one source, the Iranians asked the Soviets in early November to permit the establishment of Iranian cultural institutes in Tashkent and Ashkhabad, but were rebuffed. [REDACTED]

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Outlook

Khomeini's regime will probably continue to welcome support from the Soviets for its anti-US campaign. With Ambassador Mokri's lobbying Iran may turn to the Soviets as a source of military equipment to replace the US and could also step up economic cooperation. Relations will continue to be hindered by Khomeini's strong anti-Communist tendencies, however, and relations between the two states could easily deteriorate again if Khomeini becomes convinced that the Soviets are meddling in Iranian affairs. [REDACTED]

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There is likely to be a continuing debate among Iran's revolutionary leaders about relations with Moscow. Religious leaders will oppose too close a relationship with Moscow, while some of the more radical secular figures like Mokri may advocate closer ties. [REDACTED]

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